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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDING SENSITIVE CAPTION)

SENSITIVE

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GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: REFUGEES ARRIVE FROM SITE OF BURMA'S NEW CAPITAL

1, (SBU) Summary. About 1,000 Karen refugees have recently arrived from Burma at a refugee camp in northern Thailand, reportedly as a result of SPDC military activities aimed at creating a security cordon around its new capital at Pyinmana. Consistent with long-standing policy, the Thai have kept the border open to these new arrivals. A USG determination for refugee resettlement purposes that the Karen National Union (KNU) is a terrorist entity could undermine our ability to argue for a continuation of this policy should that ever become necessary. End summary.

12. (U) UNHCR Bangkok and NGOs recently provided Embassy with reports of new ethnic Karen refugee inflows from Burma. UNHCR and NGO estimates vary, but it appears that since the end of 2005, about 1,000 persons have arrived in the Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp located near the Thai-Burma border in the Mae Sariang District of Mae Hong Son Province. About half have arrived since early February. According to the long-time head of the Thai-Burma Border Consortium, the lead Burma refugee assistance agency, this is the largest influx of new arrivals in several years.

13. (U) UNHCR believes these persons were displaced as a result of the construction of Burma's new administrative capital at Pyinmana in southern Mandalay Division near Karen State and the SPDC's desire to have a security corridor around the large site. It reports that there are Karen villages under KNU control in the jungles and hills to the south and southeast of Pyinmana in Toungoo and Papun Districts. The SPDC is reportedly forcing the villagers to leave their homes, burning houses, and killing suspected KNU supporters. Another cause of the movements may be Pyinmana construction-related forced labor and portering requirements imposed by the SPDC on the Karen. UNHCR reports that the KNU is not confronting the SPDC militarily in these areas but defending itself as it retreats. According to ICRC (protect), the Karen National Liberation Army's 2nd Brigade, which operates in the Papun area, appears to have broken ranks with the rest of the Karen Army and stopped observing the "gentlemen's agreement," cease-fire in an attempt to retain control of traditional Karen territory. The new arrivals in Mae Ra Ma Luang are being housed, fed, and provided medical care by NGOs in the camp.

14. (U) The Thai Army has allowed these new refugees to enter Thailand, though according to UNHCR, a group of 34 was arrested and confined for a short period when the Army became concerned about the high number of arrivals. UNHCR intervened on the group's behalf and the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) subsequently told UNHCR that the KNU and Karen elders worked with the Thai Army to secure their

release. The 34 persons are now in Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp.

¶5. (U) The KRC has informed UNHCR that another 400 persons are on the way to the border and that more may follow though numbers are uncertain. The area in the immediate vicinity of Pyinmana is not heavily populated. According to Embassy Rangoon, sources inside Burma cannot confirm that the SPDC is forcing large numbers of villagers to relocate. However, the Burmese military commonly forces villagers to relocate, and Embassy Rangoon has received numerous reports that citizens have been forced to move from areas in the immediate vicinity of the new capital. Since the new capital is located near traditional Karen lands, the increased military presence in the region could have precipitated the flight of ethnic Karen villagers who fear abuse by the military.

¶6. (SBU) Comment. The continuation of Thailand's policy of an open border for the Karen refugees, some of whom are likely KNU members, is welcome. A determination by the USG for refugee resettlement purposes that the KNU is a terrorist group and that KNU members as a result are ineligible for U.S. resettlement could undermine our ability to argue that the Thai should keep the border open to similar new arrivals should the Thai become worried about the new influx and reconsider their policy. End comment.

¶7. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.
BOYCE